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ABSTRACT

The involvement of women in U.S. politics of the 1890s, specifically in the Populist Party and the National Farmers' Alliance, is discussed in this paper. Women comprised a large percentage of membership in many of the sub-alliances of the National Farmers' Alliance and a number were national leaders, including Mary Elizabeth Lease, Annie LePorte Diggs, Sarah Emery, Marion Todd, and Eva McDonald Valesh. Women played an integral part of the success of the populist movement during the 1890s. The lives of some of the more prominent women activists are highlighted, and a collective biography is constructed from organizational records. (DB)

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WOMEN IN THE FARMERS' ALLIANCE

by

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During the presidential campaign of 1892, thousands of women across the country actively and publicly worked for the election of Populist presidential and vice-presidential candidates James Weaver of Iowa and James Field of Virginia. Women worked for countless other local People's Party candidates even though they themselves could not vote in most states. For most of these women, this was not their first introduction to politics, as many of them had been members of the National Farmers' Alliance previous to the founding of the third party and had attended local, state, and national conventions of the Alliance.

In 1890 and 1891 the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union had experienced its greatest growth. These years saw a widely attended national convention, an expanded lecture system, the formation of the Reform Press Association comprised of the editors of hundreds of new or reorganized newspapers, and over one million members in twenty-seven states. Women contributed to this effort. Julie Roy Jeffrey estimates, no accurate individual state records exist, that in 1891 women totalled as many as one-third to one-half the members in some sub-alliances in North Carolina.[1] In less conservative western states where women more often participated in activities outside the home, the figure was probably higher. And in several Nebraska sub-alliances and at least one in Kansas, women members outnumbered men.

The women spoke at meetings, edited newspapers, lobbied legislatures, published novels, wrote political tracts, were elected to Alliance positions, ran for local office and in short, engaged in all political activity legally allowed them. Several states boasted national leaders; in others states women confined

themselves to local politics. Many women worked together with their husbands and children on family farms where they often retained considerable responsibility for the management of the farm and kept the account books. Given this partnership and women's knowledge of farm finances, joining the Alliance to work for the improvement of farming conditions attests to a natural extension of a rural domestic role, rather than a new role. Women saw themselves as improving the moral climate and bringing respectability to the Alliance. They believed the Alliance could strengthen the family and that women improved the Alliance. With the presence of women, family and moral issues would receive attention. Men too considered morality an important part of the ideology of the Alliance and Populist Party but emphasized different factors. For men "morality" referred to honest politicians and an equitable distribution of wealth. Women naturally supported these sentiments, but for them "morality" also included traditional family and religious values, temperance, and social purity.

The newspapers of the Alliance and Populist Party acknowledged the presence of women as a positive force; opposition papers used the presence of women as one of their strongest arguments against the third party candidates. Representing a variety of professions, most of these middle-class women belonged to Protestant denominations and had received at least a high school education. Five of them stand out as prominent national leaders. Mary Elizabeth Lease, Annie LePorte Diggs, Sarah Emery, Marion Todd, and Eva McDonald Valesh numbered among the few Alliance and Populist

supporters who performed valuable enough political work to earn modest incomes from lecture fees, editorial salaries, and book royalties.[2]

Lease and Diggs began their careers in Kansas; Diggs moved on to Washington, D.C., returning frequently to Kansas. Emery and Todd first worked in Michigan. Todd moved frequently, eventually resettling in Michigan. Valesh lived in Minnesota until after the 1896 election. All five married and raised children; Emery, Todd, and Valesh married men who were also active reformers. Unlike state leaders such as Luna Kellie in Nebraska and hundreds of other less prominent Populist women, none of the five farmed. All expressed consistent support for woman suffrage, temperance, and economic and social reform for urban working people as well as farmers. Three were born in the eastern United States; Diggs was born in Ontario, Canada. Diggs, Emery, and Lease moved west as unaccompanied single women, meeting their husbands after settling and finding jobs. In 1890 the four older women, no longer tied down by babies and small children, had already gained considerable political experience. Valesh, unmarried and childless at twenty-four, was just beginning her career.

These five national leaders were white; however, there is no reason to believe that black women were excluded from the Colored Alliance in the South although little is known of them. Barton Shaw, for example, in his study of Georgia Populism, notes the presence of black women at Populist rallies.

> Black women seemed equally dedicated [as white women were] to the movement, sometimes being seen at Populist gatherings holding their babies aloft so that they might get a glimpse of Tom Watson [a Southern Populist leader]. In Sparta a number of

black women rushed Watson and breached southern etiquette by shaking his hand.[3]

In the North Lutie Lytle, a Topeka resident, appears to be the only black Populist woman to gain recognition. For good reason Kansas blacks endorsed Populism slowly, watching carefully to see if the Populists awarded more recognition in the form of jobs to blacks than the Republican Party did. Even the nomination of a black Topeka minister, Blanche Foster, for the position of state auditor in 1890 did not win over a majority of blacks to the Populist cause. Yet, by 1983 a black People's Party club had been formed, and by 1894 the Populists began nominating more black men for minor municipal positions. Lutie Lytle's father, a Topeka policeman, joined the integrated Populist Flambeau Club and through this club attempted to gain a nomination for political office. Presumably because of her assistance in the campaign of 1894, Lytle received a patronage job as the assistant enrolling clerk for the Populists in 1895.[4]

With the use of a few biographical sketches and memoirs, a handful of letters, and an oral history, brief biographies of Luna Kellie, Mary Elizabeth Lease, Annie Diggs, Sarah Emery, Marion Todd, and Eva McDonald Valesh can be reconstructed. Scant documentation, however, exists for the remaining Alliance and Populist women. For some, birth and death dates, names of family members, residence, and primary occupation comprise the historical record. For others, only a name and the office a woman held, an announcement of a speech given at a local Alliance meeting or a name included in a list of delegates remain.

For eighteen Populist women leaders in Kansas, Colorado,

Nebraska, Texas, Montana, Michigan, and Minnesota, sufficient biographical information exists from which to construct a collective biography.[5] Although eighteen is a small number from which to make generalizations, these women are probably not atypical. The eighteen women had received pay for political work, held an Alliance or Populist office at a local or state level, received a Populist patronage job, or held a position on the Executive Committee of the Populist Party. The women, with the exception of Lytle, were white, and all espoused some form of Protestantism although Diggs and Lease had been raised Catholic. Each had obtained at least a high school education, and three attended a professional school in order to practice medicine or law; a fourth studied law at home.

In 1890 their ages spanned from Eva Corning, a nineteen-year-old Kansas journalist to fifty-two-year-old Sarah Emery. All but two married; two were widows in the 1890s, but for several their marriages were unsatisfactory; by the end of the Populist movement, five had divorced their husbands. Most women married men who shared their political interests; nine out of fifteen for whom there is information had husbands who worked in the reform movement. Bina Otis' husband ran for electoral office. Out of sixteen, ten moved west as adults. Five unmarried women moved west alone, leaving family and friends behind. Only six had been born into farming families.

In the 1890s Bina Otis was the only one who neither farmed nor earned a living outside the home; Bettie Gay earned her living farming as did Luna Kellie; the remaining fifteen supported or partially supported themselves in jobs away from farm and home or

combined farming with other activities, some returning to full-time farming at the end of the Populist era. Half of them had at one time farmed; seven were farming in 1890. Only one woman lived in an industrial city; the remaining who did not farm lived in rural villages or larger towns that formed the marketing centers for outlying farming regions; for example, five women lived in either Topeka or Wichita.

Mari Jo Buhle argues that Populist women were city dwellers but does not make a distinction between industrial cities and cities which served farming communities. Nor does she make a distinction between the leaders of the movement (several of whom had farmed previous to involvement in party politics) and the thousands of women farmers who belonged to local sub-allliances and actively supported Populist candidates.[6] Of Populist leaders only Marion Todd, Sarah Emery, and Eva McDonald Valesh came into rural-focused reform work without having had previous farming experience or having lived in a farming community. Even Mary Elizabeth Lease and her husband Charles farmed, if only briefly, on several occasions, eventually settling in Wichita, a farm-centered community in the 1890s.

Among the women were one school superintendent, one doctor, and one practicing attorney; the others earned a living at journalism and various forms of writing, at politics as paid organizers and lecturers, and at combinations of these activities. With the exception of Montana attorney, Ella Knowles, all the women were writers. In addition to writing for newspapers, they wrote fiction, essays and treatises, poetry and songs. Most wrote in

more than one form. The women joined a variety of reform organizations. Seven out of eleven had previously belonged to a third party, five to the Knights of Labor. Only two had belonged to the less radical Grange. Out of ten, eight joined an equal suffrage society and six the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Ten served as officers in the National Woman's Alliance, the woman's auxiliary to the Farmers' Alliance. In general the women leaders of the Farmers' Alliance and subsequently the Populist Party were educated middle-class women espousing traditional family-centered values that they combined without contradiction with public roles and radical economic and political views.

Constructing a collective biography for less prominent Alliance members is even more difficult as few membership records exist for the Farmers' Alliance. Nebraska provides the largest and most complete set of records for a state Alliance. These records, although inconsistent and incomplete, document membership from 1887-1897.[7] Not all records exist for each year, and the method of keeping records changed as the record keepers changed, consequently the figures can only be considered rough estimates. The most serious problem with estimating the number of women members in the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance rests with the method of reporting sub-alliance members to the state secretary. Every three months each sub-alliance was required to send in quarterly reports giving the number of female members and the number of male members, the numbers of suspensions, the names of officers, and the amount of dues collected. Some records compiled from quarterly reports are available for the years 1890-1894; however, in many cases women members were not counted. Frequently a woman secretary would send

in a signed quarterly report omitting women members including herself entirely. Presumably, married women sometimes omitted themselves, counting married couples as a single member. Others may have omitted single women because women were not required to pay dues. Consequently one can assume that a large number of sub-alliances reporting only male members may indeed have had female members. Even with what appears to be a large number of omissions, recorded female membership in Nebraska attests to a substantial number of Alliance women.

Out of 105 sub-alliance quarterly reports submitted for September 1890 through January 1894, twenty-six percent had women officers and forty-eight percent of those women officers were related to another officer, probably husbands, possibly fathers or sons. Only two sub-alliances reported more than one woman officer. Fourteen percent of the 105 sub-alliances had more female members than male members. Often the differences were small, with the number of women exceeding the number of men by no more than two or three. In some sub-alliances where women members exceeded male members for only a brief time, the secretary reported suspensions due to delinquent dues. As soon as the dues were paid, the members were reinstated. These cases cannot be considered examples of sub-alliances with more women for the men probably continued coming to meetings and were considered members.

Thirty-six percent of the sample 105 sub-alliances reported no women members in 1893 and 1894; three of those reporting, however, listed women secretaries. One hundred five sub-alliances totalled 1,432 men compared to 639 women or thirty-one percent. There is

no reason to believe that this percentage for the number of women members is not representative of (and lower than) the total number of women in the Alliance.

For these women, women who would be national leaders in the Populist Party and those who would stay close to home attending local sub-alliance meetings, the reform movement offered the potential (ultimately unfulfilled by the Populists) to relieve farm poverty, to insure the stability of the farm family, and to secure women's suffrage and temperance. These women would attend the first state and national Alliance conventions in 1891, voting as delegates to form a new political party, the Populist Party, and then returning home to work with men in gathering support for the new party, nominating state candidates and selecting delegates for the 1892 Populist conventions. Women not only expected "relief" with a new government, but they also expected to be part of the new government. As Lease expressed it, "no government can be complete without woman, any more than can the home."[8]

NOTES

1 Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Women in the Southern Farmers' Alliance," Feminist Studies 3 (Fall 1975): 77.

2 Biographical sketches have been compiled from the following: O. Gene Clanton, "Intolerant Populist? The Disaffection of Mary Elizabeth Lease," Kansas Historical Quarterly 34 (Spring 1968):189-200; Dorothy Rose Blumberg, "Populist Orator: A Profile" Kansas History 1 (Spring 1978):3-15; Connie Weddel, "Annie Diggs," (Master's thesis, Wichita State University, 1980); Elizabeth Faue, "Women, Work, and Union: Eva McDonald Valesh and the Roots of Personal Ideology," (unpublished paper, University of Minnesota, 1982); Rhoda R. Gilman, "Eva McDonald Valesh: Minnesota Populist," in Women of Minnesota, eds. Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), 55-76, 348-51; Pauline Adams and Emma S. Thornton, A Populist Assault; Sarah E. Van De Vort Emery on American Democracy: 1862-1895 (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982; Luna Kellie, "Memoirs of Luna Kellie," n.d., Nebraska State Historical Society, MS. 3914, Lincoln, Nebr.; Kellie, "James Thomson Kellie," 1920, Papers of the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance, Nebraska State Historical Society, microfilm, MS series 2623; Kellie, "The Farmers' Alliance in Nebraska: A History of Its Later Period from 1894 to 1901," 1926, Nebraska Alliance Papers; and Douglas Bakken, ed., "Luna E. Kellie and the Farmers' Alliance," Nebraska History 50 (1969):185-87, a reprint with annotations of Kellie's Alliance reminiscences. Eva McDonald Valesh, "The Reminiscences of Eva McDonald Valesh" (oral history transcript, Columbia University, 1972); Mary Louise Jeffery, "Young Radicals of the Nineties," Nebraska History 38 (March 1957):25-41; Annie Diggs, "Women of the Farmers' Alliance," Arena 6 (1892):165-67; Lelia J. Robinson, "Women Lawyers in the United States," Green Bag (January and April 1890):26-27; 181-82; Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, History of Woman Suffrage, vol. 4 (Rochester, N.Y.: 1902); Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, eds., A Woman of the Century (New York: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893); Who Was Who in America, 1897-1942 (Chicago: A.N. Marquis Co., 1942); Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, Notable American Women (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

3 Barton Shaw, The Wool-Hat Boys (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 177.

4 Biographical sketch of Lutie Lytle is summarized from Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 324; "Topeka at the Turn of the Century," Shawnee County Historical Society Bulletin, 52 (June 1975), 92; Topeka Capital, 15 September 1897; Topeka State Ledger, 11 January 1895, 27 November

1896; Historical Preservation in Kansas: Black Historic Sites (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1977), 31; Topeka Colored Citizen, 22 July 1897; 1 July 1897; 28 October 1897; 7 October 1897.

5 The eighteen women included in this analysis are: Eva Corning, Kansas; Emma Ghent Curtis, Colorado; Ellen Dabbs, Texas; Caroline Diehl, Oklahoma; Annie Diggs, Kansas and Washington, D.C.; Sarah Emery, Michigan; Bettie Gay, Texas; Luna Kellie, Nebraska; Ella Knowles, Montana; Mary Elizabeth Lease, Kansas; Fannie McCormick, Kansas; Florence Olmstead, Kansas; Bina Otis, Kansas; Emma Pack, Kansas; Martha Southworth, Colorado; Marion Todd, Michigan; Eva McDonald Valesh, Minnesota; and Fannie Vickrey, Kansas. Women such as Lutie Lytle, Kansas Populist and attorney and Elsie Buckman who served as Nebraska State Secretary and then for the National Alliance Aid have been omitted because of lack of biographical material. In 1893 Frances Willard, President of the WCTU, and Mary Livermore, a prominent suffragist and temperance worker, published A Woman of the Century which contained "1,470 biographical sketches" of "leading American women in all walks of life." The choices were highly selective, women in the eastern states being given precedent. The editors included only six Alliance and Populist women: Ellen Dabbs, Cora Diehl, Annie Diggs, Ella Knowles, Marion Todd, and Eva McDonald Valesh. Doubtless Willard felt less than kindly toward the Populists, as they had not included a temperance plank in the 1892 platform.

6 Mari Jo Buhle, Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 83-84.

7 Nebraska Farmers' Alliance membership records are in the Papers of the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance, Nebraska State Historical Society. The records include some Quarterly Reports from 1890-1897; Ledger Books for Receipts and Expenditures, 1887-1895; Membership Journals, 1889-1895; Annual Membership Report (undated); and Sub-alliance Ledger Book, 1887-1891.

8 Indianapolis American Nonconformist, 19 November 1891.